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U of M president, Mary Sue Coleman says colleges 'can do more'

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By [mtkolar](#)

Ann Arbor Business Review

Coleman

University of Michigan President Mary Sue Coleman, widely praised for her efforts to attract companies like Google to Ann Arbor, acknowledged that she didn't immediately recognize the stark reality of Michigan's economy and the university's need to get more involved.

Coleman had experience helping universities develop closer ties to business, but she said it took time to realize that Michigan was going through a "crisis" unlike what she had seen at the University of North Carolina, University of Iowa and the University of New Mexico.

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"I came here with a lot of experience having thought about these issues," Coleman said, relating it to witnessing the development of the Research Triangle in North Carolina.

Coleman discussed U-M's role in economic transformation at "The Role of Engaged Universities in Economic Development" conference Oct. 15 at the University of Michigan.

Coleman played a role in tightening relationships between universities and business while she was president of the University of Iowa from 1995 to 2002 and as provost at the University of New Mexico.

Michigan, though, isn't the same, she said.

"In those circumstances I was extremely interested and intrigued in how the universities could support that activity, but it wasn't, 'Oh my gosh we have to change the whole state,'" Coleman told Business Review.

Coleman has been heralded locally for playing a key role in helping to attract Google and Aernnova Aerospace to the Ann Arbor region.



After arriving at U-M in 2002, Coleman said she realized "that the state of Michigan was undergoing a transformation. It took me maybe a couple of years to get my arms around what this all meant, but certainly since 2003, 2004, it's become ever more clear about what's going on," she said.

Coleman appeared on a panel at the conference with Michigan State University President Lou Anna K. Simon and Wayne State University President Irvin D. Reid to discuss the importance of the University Research Corridor.

The URC released its first collective report that it is expected to deliver annually, summarizing its research scope and economic impact.

The universities together spent \$1.37 billion on research in 2007. The URC spun out an average of 15 companies per year from 2002 to 2006, according to the report.

Nonetheless, Coleman said the universities could make advancements.

"We can do more and we should do more. We need to be nimble. We need to be highly engaged partners in the state's success," she said. "We have a vision that allows us to work together."

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But the university presidents criticized the level of funding provided by the state government for higher education and said it has to improve if the universities are to play an increased role in economic development initiatives.

Throughout the first day of the conference, several speakers called for an increased focus on education as a tool in economic transformation.

But simply convincing students in Michigan to attend college has proved to be a challenge until recently because the state's economic infrastructure was based heavily on manufacturing jobs that didn't require a college degree, said Stephen Forrest, U-M's vice president for research.

"Michigan households are among the least likely to encourage their children to go on to college education," Forrest said.

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Charles Vest, president of the National Academy of Engineering and president emeritus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, acknowledged that education would play the most important role in helping Michigan revive its economy.

"Prospering in the knowledge age requires people with knowledge," he said.

But he said the problem runs deeper than convincing students to attend college. He said fewer than 15 percent of high school graduates today have the educational background to pursue a degree in science or engineering.

Derrick Kuzak, group vice president of global product development for Ford Motor Co., said Michigan needs to produce "systemic and creative thinkers" to compete in an increasingly globalized economy. He said engineering schools should put a heightened emphasis on coursework in control systems, linear programs and economics.

"The type of engineering work that we will continue to focus on here in Michigan is our most knowledge-focused vehicle development work," Kuzak said.

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Vivek Wadhwa, a Wertheim Fellow at Harvard Law School, said the educational system in America needs to work better with business in an effort to help America keep up with global competition.

"The university system is a gold mine of knowledge and information. The fact is we could be getting a lot more out of our system than we're getting now," he said. "If we're going to compete, we need to harness every bit of energy we can get out of our system."

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